

Finding Discipline

Last weekend, my family and I attended an Iftar meal at a local mosque as our Muslim friends celebrated Ramadan, that began May 16. It will last for 30 days.

This is not an easy time of year for Muslims to fast from sunrise to sunset. They are not eating or drinking anything for nearly 16 hours each day. At sunset, they have a big, festive meal together, and frequently they invite non-Muslims to join them. My Muslim friends told me that sleep deprivation is the biggest challenge during Ramadan. After the Iftar meal at night, which concludes with community prayers, they go straight home and try to sleep as best they can. At 4 a.m.,



Traditional Iftar meal

they wake and have their last big meal of the day. Around 4:19 a.m., the sun breaks into the night sky and the day-long fast begins. Some of my Muslim friends say they can fall asleep again after this last pre-dawn meal, but most say it is impossible; they head into the day as best they can. Thirty straight days of this routine leaves most Muslims exhausted, but some say it draws them wonderfully closer to God. In either case, Muslims celebrate Ramadan because they want to be obedient to the will of God.

Obedience is a high virtue in the Christian life, too. Most of us wrestle mightily with following God's will versus following our own. It is a similar struggle to working out. Not many of us love to hear the alarm sounding early in the morning, beckoning us to rise from our comfortable beds to engage in rigorous physical exercise. But, we do it because we know it is good for our physical health. In the same way, not many of us want to discipline ourselves regularly to pray, meditate, and read the Bible alone with God, or meet on a regular basis with other believers. We would rather jump into the day, follow our own script and pursue the exciting things we have planned for ourselves. We would rather have a cold beverage and sit in front of the television than go next door to help a neighbor in need. It takes discipline and faith to be obedient to God's will for our lives.

My wife and I saw Jesus Christ Superstar at the Civic Opera House in Chicago last weekend. It was a spectacular performance. I remembered my confirmation teacher playing songs from this delightful musical for our junior high class in 1969. A flood of memories came back to me. I highly recommend seeing it if you

can. One of the most significant scenes in the production is when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane wrestling with God before his arrest. At the top of his lungs in an anguishing song, he cries out to God, pleading for absolute certainty and clarity that his impending crucifixion was indeed God's will for his life. But, finally, Jesus gives up and decides to trust God and remain obedient to his Father's will.

Nowhere in all of the Bible is trust and obedience more exemplified than this particular moment in Christ's life. It is similar to when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. The Gospel of Luke tells us, "Then Jesus withdrew from the disciples about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground." (Luke 22:41-44)



**The musical,
Jesus Christ Superstar**

Great discipline is required in the Christian life. But, the truth is that most of us like the easier parts of our faith -- being forgiven, having fellowship, or hearing a good sermon. But, how about the harder parts of our faith -- observing the Sabbath, tithing, reading the Bible every day, pursuing retreats on a regular basis, fasting, listening before speaking, turning the other cheek or loving our enemies? The word discipline comes from the same Greek word as disciple, which means learner or pupil. In other words, a person who is disciplined or obedient is someone who wants to learn. Obeying God, trusting his commands for our lives, takes great faith -- that his ways are superior to our own; that his path brings joy, healing and life, while following our own will often invites trouble and hardship.

I think Muslims can teach Christians a lot about obedience. Most of my Muslim friends are incredibly disciplined and obedient to God. I am amazed with their resolve and focus during Ramadan. Personally, I think there are healthier, safer and better ways to fast; but, I admire greatly their obedience and self-control. Muslims do not drink alcohol. They pray five times a day. All of these things take great discipline. Where I differ with Muslims is with their motivation. Many of their acts of discipline are done because they fear God's final judgment on their lives. They are trying to accumulate as many good points with God as possible through their obedient acts. But, their spiritual disciplines and reverence are to be admired, nonetheless.

My motivation, as a Christian, comes from knowing that God loves me as much as he loves his own son, who died on a cross to forgive me from my sins. It is not by

my works or performance that I will meet God one day in Heaven, but because I have accepted his unconditional love as his gift to me. And this gift is available to all who believe in him.

We Christians tend to get off track in entirely different ways. We often take our freedoms in Christ for granted. We think we can relax because Jesus Christ has done everything for us; all we need to do is exercise faith, sit back, and reap all the benefits. Such an attitude, however, is a dangerous misunderstanding of our faith; it involves a shallow reading and understanding of Scripture. We Christians should be even more disciplined than people of other philosophies or faiths. After all, the Bible asks us to pray without ceasing, be willing to give away our possessions, become poor in spirit, turn the other cheek, and suffer persecution, just to name a few of Jesus' commands. Our motivation to follow these commands of Jesus should come from a spirit of joy, gratitude and love, not fear - for all that Christ has done for us. The brother of Jesus, James, put it this way, "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing."(James1:22,25)



James, Jesus's brother

One of the most confining things a Christian can do is to only hang around other Christians. Jesus forged relationships with people very different from himself -- prostitutes, tax collectors, unschooled fishermen and Samaritans, just to name a few. If we befriend only people who resemble ourselves, the odds are very high we will be blind to the ways in which we can grow, mature and become more like Jesus. People of different faiths and cultures can often help us recognize and appreciate something new and important about our own faith. I encourage you and your congregation to have vibrant and rich relationships with people of different religions and cultural backgrounds if you can.

While our Muslim friends are seeking a closer relationship to God during the final days of Ramadan, it would be a good time for us as Christians to follow more discipline in our spiritual lives as we seek God's will and bring us closer to our Lord and Savior.